

How Jewish life is booming in the Yiddish centre of Russia

BIROBIDZHAN is an area in Russia established more than 60 years ago as the Jewish Autonomous Region.

Today it epitomises the paradox of renewed Jewish life in the former Soviet Union.

Along with the freedom to practise Judaism openly has come a sharp increase in the number of Jews emigrating to Israel.

"Now that the Jewish autonomy has real meaning," says Birobidzhan's mayor, Vladimir Bolotnov, "people are leaving."

A destination for Jewish immigration since 1928 and officially designated the Jewish Autonomous Region by Stalin in 1934, Birobidzhan was long touted by the Soviet authorities as an example of flourishing Jewish life in the Soviet Union.

Yiddish, along with Russian, has been the official language in the 14,000 square mile region.

A Yiddish newspaper, *Der Birobidzhaner Shern*, appears daily. The sign over the railway station is in Yiddish.

The main street of the town of 85,000 is named after Yiddish writer Sholom

DAVID LANDAU
in Birobidzhan, Russia

Alchem, whose bust adorns the city library and museum.

In practice, though, the Yiddish language all but died in Birobidzhan the name for both the city and the region after Stalin's bloody purge of the region's first leaders in the late 1930s and his edict banning the teaching of Yiddish throughout the Soviet Union in 1949.

Even after Stalin's death, the edict was never reversed.

The Jewish population 10-15 per cent of the two million inhabitants, actually lived no differently from other Soviet Jews in the days before former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's sweeping liberalisation of the country.

Birobidzhan's Jews were cut off from Israel and the Jewish world, forbidden to engage in their religion or culture and were constantly subjected to the Communist Party's virulently anti-Zionist line.

The only difference was that in Birobidzhan, his propaganda line was delivered in Yiddish as well as in Russian.

Much has now changed. A recent issue of the Yiddish newspaper devoted the top of its front page to Passover greetings from the governor of the region and from the Russian president's personal

representative in Birobidzhan, Josef Nychin, who is the scion of a well-known Jewish Birobidzhan family.

There have been other, equally dramatic changes. Israeli visitors, as well as Jewish books, teaching aids and Passover matzot, began arriving here in 1989.

In the city library's Yiddish reading room, Chabad chassidic tracts now jostle for shelf space with Stalin's *On Leninism*.

Hebrew, Yiddish and Jewish tradition are taught in Jewish schools to young people and adults who previously knew nothing of their faith and heritage.

HUNDREDS of families already have emigrated to Israel, mainly to Ma'alot, Carmiel and Upper Nazareth in the Galilee. Hundreds more are actively planning to leave.

"They only go for economic reasons," says Bolotnov, the non-Jewish mayor who has visited Israel, where his town has as its sister city the Jewish-Arab city of Ma'alot.

"In our country, the time has come when each person can choose what he wants," he adds.

"I am not prepared to influence them to stay, but, for those who do stay, we will help provide them with all they need to pursue their culture, their festivals and studies."

The rabbi who rekindled Yiddishkeit in Siberia . . .

AFTER a year and a half in Siberia, Rabbi Yehudah Weissler recently returned home to England.

He was the chief rabbi of Siberia and Novosibirsk and the only rabbi in all of Siberia.

While in the frozen wasteland, the 26-year-old rabbi and his wife Mirella sent by the Israeli organisation Shvut Ami sparked a quiet revolution.

Rabbi Weissler started a small yeshiva and his wife opened the first Jewish kindergarten in Novosibirsk.

Together, they built the only mikva to be used in Siberia for more than 50 years, and they made sure there is now kosher meat.

Up five flights of stairs in a grim, decaying Siberian apartment building, their home was the first kosher home in Siberia in decades.

Novosibirsk, deep inside Siberia, is the capital and economic and cultural centre of Siberia, which stretches across eight time zones.

Novosibirsk feels like a frontier town, and is said to be the exact centre of Russia.

Noisy, rickety trams lumber through the city under a thick network of overhead electric wires. Old women in heavy parkas and fur hats clean mud from the tram tracks. Gigantic factories line the Ob River, billowing smoke into air already thick with pollution and spewing waste into the water.

Here, as throughout Russia, crime and unemployment have drastically increased over the past several years.

"There are officially about 10,000 Jews in Novosibirsk," Rabbi Weissler said before his departure. "But there is enormous assimilation, and no one knows how many Jews there really are."

"People tell me, 'My parents are both Jewish, but I'm not.'"

About 2,000 Jews from Novosibirsk have emigrated to Israel in the past several years.

"In 1989, when it became possible, all the Jews who wanted to packed up and left," said Rabbi Weissler.

"Now we are trying to build a community again. And the community is growing. In what has become known as the Law of Russian Jews, the more Jews leave, the more remain."

Jews are coming out of the woodwork, attending events and associating with the Jewish community.

Even the mayor of Novosibirsk is believed to have a Jewish father, although he has no connection with the community.

Under communism, Jewish communal life was forcibly eradicated. Most Jews here have only hazy memories of being Jewish.

"When I arrived, I found virtually no Jewish life," said Rabbi Weissler. "Even for Yom Kippur there was only a tiny gathering."

Now there are many sparks of Jewish life. More than 800 people came to a Purim celebration.

The government of Israel runs an Israeli cultural centre and a Sunday school for 75 children.

The Jewish Agency organises aliya and activities for young people. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee funds many of the new community activities and has established a Jewish library in the centre of town.

Originally, there were two synagogues in Novosibirsk, but both were confiscated after the 1917 Communist Revolution.

ABOUT 20 years ago, the Jews were allowed to open a synagogue in a tiny blue wooden house on the outskirts of town. They had to stop using it when the ceiling fell in.

The oven that was once used to bake matzo now lies rusting and useless. The community thinks that a large brick building standing in the centre of town used to be their main synagogue and they are trying to reclaim it.

There are 27 active Jewish communities across Siberia and the Soviet Far East. But Rabbi Weissler believes that there could be at least the same number of cities with a sizable number of Jews where there is not yet any

DEBORAH KAZIS
in Novosibirsk and Omsk, Siberia

organised Jewish life.

He has travelled to communities throughout Siberia.

"The further East in Siberia you go, the further away from Europe, the more cut off from their past the Jews are and the less Jewish identity they have retained," he said.

The first Jews are believed to have come to Siberia from Lithuania in the 17th century.

Although Siberia lay outside of the Pale of Settlement, the area where Jews were allowed to live, some Jewish criminals and political exiles were sent to labour camps there.

Jews also went to Siberia as traders, particularly in furs. But most of the Jews came from Ukraine and Byelorussia during World War Two, fleeing from the Germans.

Others came as factories were moved east, farther from Hitler's reach. The neighbouring - in Siberian terms - community of Omsk, with about 8,000 Jews, is an overnight journey away on the Trans-Siberian railway.

OMSK has no rabbi, but the leader of the synagogue, Ruvim Epshtein, leads services and presides over the revival of Jewish life in his town.

For holidays, close to 400 people fill up the hall.

"One hundred years ago, there were two synagogues, a Jewish school and two rabbis," he says.

"But during the Soviet period, people were afraid to come. After you visited the Jewish community, you might be invited to visit the KGB."

A recent fire in the synagogue in Omsk is believed to have been arson, motivated by antisemitism.

The fire was started immediately after a movie about fascism appeared on television.

Omsk now has a Sunday school with 90 children, Hebrew classes, a Jewish newspaper, a Jewish cultural society and two youth clubs with more than 100 teenagers.

"It's our dream one day to set up a Jewish school," says Ludmilla Brook, a young activist in the community. "And we need a rabbi."

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Bucharest gets new chief rabbi

ODETTE BLUMENFELD
in Bucharest

ANEW chief rabbi for Bucharest has been appointed a year to the day since Romanian Chief Rabbi Moses Rosen died.

Eventually, the newly selected Yehzekel Mark will serve as the chief rabbi for the entire nation.

He was overwhelmingly chosen for the post late last month by the board of the Federation of the Romanian Jewish Communities. He had two competitors, and received 52 of 56 votes.

Mark was born in 1928 in Bascesti-Roman, Romania, and illegally emigrated to Israel. He also spent many years in South Africa.

A ceremony for Rabbi Rosen, held at the Choral Temple in Bucharest, drew representatives of Jewish communities of Romania and government officials as well as distinguished guests from Israel and the United States. Rabbi Rosen, who was chief rabbi of Romania from 1948 until his death last year, wielded an extraordinary amount of influence within that country as a religious leader and as a frequent ambassador to the United States on behalf of Romania.



Packed up and ready to go . . . youngsters from the former Soviet Union en route to Israel

HUNGARIAN and world Jewish leaders recently commemorated the 51st anniversary of the deportations of Hungarian Jews during World War Two.

At least 25 memorial services were held across Hungary during the past two months, said Gusztav Zoltai, executive director of the

Central Board of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary.

No one representing the Hungarian government attended the ceremony at the Tabac Street Synagogue in Budapest the largest in Central Europe.

AGNES BOHM
in Budapest

Among the guests were representatives of the World Jewish Congress. Hundreds of people gathered at the Holocaust memorial behind the synagogue.

Jews mark deportations

The memorial, called Tree of Life, was created by Hungarian sculptor Imre Varga. Each leaf on the tree represents a Jewish victim.

This year, many smaller synagogues in Hungary are being reconstructed and restored, Zoltai

said. The restoration of the Tabac Street synagogue is also underway.

But a couple of weeks before the Holocaust commemoration, the Hungarian construction firm Galilea, which is renovating the synagogue, received a neo-Nazi propaganda leaflet via fax.

The leaflet, decorated with two big black swastikas, was sent from in New York.